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Penn Avenue Initiative Proposal
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*Main Street/Penn Street:
Fostering Social Interaction Through Design*



Penn Avenue is not only the conduit between the White House and the Capitol, but the bridge between the federal south and the urban north of Washington, D.C. It's a well-traversed thoroughfare for cars, pedestrians, buses, bicycles, and skaters. It encompasses multiple plazas, including the Army Navy Memorial and Freedom Plaza, and smaller parks, such as Indiana Plaza and John Marshall Park. Yet although Pennsylvania Avenue is such a symbolic and geographic artery, somehow it still lacks the livelihood of an all-American Main Street fitting for our nation's capital.

Historically, the PADC's development of the area has focused less on human-scale design. Instead, it has opted more often for a monumental scale fitting to "one of the historic thoroughfares of the world," as described in the 1902 McMillan Plan.¹ However, much as the Champs-Élysées and other capital streets illustrate, historicism and modernity can thrive together given the appropriate urban environments to take root. The NCPC's request for public comments on the Penn Ave Initiative is a shift towards more sensitive, sustainable, and successful development of

this area with an emphasis on constant public participation. If Penn Ave is to be the Main Street of our nation's capital, greater attention needs to be paid to its pedestrian stakeholders—the workforce, active pedestrians (inclusive of joggers, youth, and tourists), and the homeless.

¹ The Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia. I. Report of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia, II. Report of the Park Commission, (aka The McMillan Commission Report), edited by Charles Moore, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1902, p. 69.

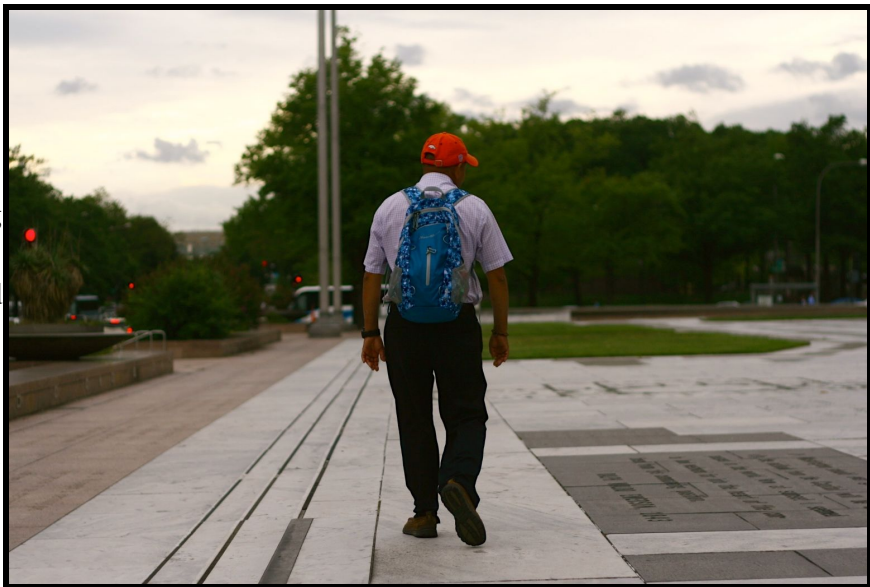
Navy Memorial: Engaging the Workforce

One of the most necessary and currently underserved public activities for a federal or district worker in this area is eating lunch. The new Post Office Pavilion development venture will likely attract more culinary options, but while this will expand the economic and fiscal interests of the area, Penn Ave also needs better human-oriented, public-use dining areas that are not merely attached to existing restaurant space. The Navy Memorial with its Granite Sea is yet another barrier to organic activity in an existing concrete jungle. Introducing public restaurant-style seating in this area, similar to the Times Square Development additions in NYC, would incorporate the existing take-out/brown-bag culture of D.C. within a more socially-inviting context.

Freedom Plaza: Hub of Human Activity

If the Granite Sea could be a dining oasis amidst concrete, Freedom Plaza should be a place to freely congregate. In the compiled public comments from the July 23rd Workshop, locals indicated a lack of congregation areas along Penn Ave that were child-friendly, weather/climate-responsive, inviting, and accessible.² Considering its history as a frequent arena for demonstrations and that it is named in honor of Martin Luther King Jr., Freedom Plaza already has many of the elements of a gathering square. Yet observation and public opinion reflect that the plaza is most often treated as path of transit, not a node of engagement.

Outdoor fitness course equipment,³ shaded areas, and inviting seating would cater to the needs of D.C.'s famously active citizenry while also providing gathering and picnic areas for families and youth. The original inlaid stonework in Freedom Plaza commemorates L'Enfant's design for Washington, D.C. Maintaining this historical element merely requires sensitive and incorporative architectural additions.



Instead of the inlaid map remaining a flat walkway, L'Enfant's design can be used to position the fitness equipment within Freedom Plaza. The representative patches of lawn are existing picnic-friendly areas that could be enlivened with a shade-giving tree and underlying cafe-style seating.

² See: http://www.ncpc.gov/pennavenue/docs/Compiled_Public_Comments_July_23_2014_Workshop.pdf

³ See: <http://www.fittrail.com/10station.html>

Homelessness: Problem or Public?



Currently, Freedom Plaza's most frequently observed visitors are joggers/commuters, local youth (especially skateboarders), and the homeless. While joggers and commuters are frequently targeted recipients of public space programming (such as running trails or bus stop seating), congregating youth or transient populations are vastly underrepresented in city planning and underserved by city outcomes.

Instead of continuing to address this through legislating and criminalizing skateboarding and loitering, activities such as these could be more holistically addressed by nurturing alternate public use of these areas. Introducing more seating might seem counterintuitive, but better serves the community by inviting family and tourist use which could also drive further commercial developments such as shops and restaurants.⁴ Furthermore, the introduction of fitness trails and picnic sites within Freedom Plaza will deter inappropriate or unsafe use of skateboards and roller blades along pedestrian plazas by creating architectural impediments to such activity.

Overall, the NCPC's development of Penn Avenue is really an endeavour to create the vitality of a Main Street. Corporate and federal stakeholders have regularly influenced Penn Avenue development but creating a district that the public can adopt as their own requires more participation and attention paid to the daily visitors, from office worker to marathon runner, transient to dog-walker. Too often, the most regular visitors to public spaces are those least involved in the creation and direction of those spaces. Making a Main Street means endeavouring instead to include diverse communities in the pursuit of a social, interactive, and humane space.

⁴ http://www.popcenter.org/problems/homeless_encampments/3